



Health Care for the Homeless Network (HCHN)
Public Health - Seattle & King County

Homeless Health News

Issue 5

September 2005

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Working With Hurricane Evacuees

We've had some reports of hurricane evacuees staying in local homeless shelters and housing programs. Please help assure that these individuals connect to local and federal programs available to assist them.

- American Red Cross can help with immediate assistance and basic needs: 206-323-2345 or 1-866-GET-INFO.
- Crisis Clinic Community Information Line has extensive info for evacuees at 206-461-3200 or 1-800-621-INFO.
- Washington State DSHS Community Service Of-

fices (CSOs) can help with applications for food stamps, Medicaid, other DSHS programs, and FEMA registration: 1-800-865-7801.

- To register with FEMA, evacuees should call 1-800-621-FEMA (3362). They should also promptly update FEMA with any change of address or phone number.
- Washington State has set up an info clearinghouse for evacuees at 1-800-941-2930 or <http://www.ga.wa.gov/overturegreen/>
- King County Dept of Community and Human Ser-

vices has info at <http://www.metrokc.gov/dchs/admin/katrina.htm>.

Keep in mind that referrals to health care services are particularly important at this time, since evacuees may have time-sensitive needs such as getting prescriptions filled, updating immunizations, help dealing with stress, or getting treatment for health conditions. All of the numbers above, as well as regular referral channels to health care for the homeless services and community clinics, are appropriate for helping people connect to care.

Special points of interest:

- *Opportunity for Non-Citizen Children to Apply for Health Coverage.*
- *Applications accepted: December 1 – 16, 2005!*
- *Mail applications (after Nov 30th, 2005) to: MEDS, PO Box 45531 Olympia, WA 98599-5531*
- *For more information: <http://fortress.wa.gov/dshs/maa/Eligibility/ChildrensHealth.html> 1-877-KIDS-NOW (1-877-543-7669)*

Act Now: Limited Time Opportunity for Non-Citizen Children to Apply for Health Care Coverage

Does your program work with non-citizen children under age 18?

Washington State DSHS "Healthy Kids Now!" Program will expand to cover more children beginning January 2006. This program will provide full-scope medical coverage similar to Children's Medicaid. However, enrollment is limited and a waiting list is expected to develop quickly.

Who is eligible?

Non-citizen children under age 18 in families under the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) are eligible to apply. These are children that have been ineligible for Medicaid due to immigration status

only. This program is available regardless of immigration status.

When to apply

DSHS will begin accepting applications December 1st, 2005. Applications received between Dec 1 and Dec 16, 2005 will have first priority.

If more children apply than there are slots available, there will be a random drawing from those applications received Dec 1-16. Those not initially offered coverage will be put on a waiting list.

Application Process

A separate application has been developed for the Children's Health Program. It is available at [http://](http://fortress.wa.gov/dshs/maa/Eligibility/ChildrensHealth.html)

fortress.wa.gov/dshs/maa/Eligibility/ChildrensHealth.html or by calling 1-877-KIDS-NOW. Although the original Healthy Kids Now! application can still be used, the new application is bar coded specifically for this program.

MEDS (Medical Eligibility Determination Services) will process the applications.

DSHS Community Services Offices (CSO) will also accept and then forward the applications. However, to assure a spot in the random drawing, applications must be received by MEDS by **December 16th**.

MRSA infections are very often mistaken for spider bites.

For more information about MRSA visit:

www.metrokc.gov/prevcont/mrsa.htm

www.cdc.gov/ncidod/hip/aresist/ca_mrsa_public.htm

Understanding MRSA (“Mer-Sa”) Staph Infections

What is MRSA?

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus or MRSA is a form of staph (skin) infection that is resistant to the Methicillin antibiotic family.

Common Symptoms

MRSA infections are often mistaken for spider bites. They may begin with a break in the skin (cut, injection, or other) that becomes infected. MRSA can cause skin infections or sores that may look like a pimple or boil and can be red, swollen, painful, or have pus or drainage.

Who is at Risk?

People with weakened immune systems may be at risk

for more severe illness if they become infected with MRSA. Those who live in crowded settings, have long-term illness, are injection drug users, or have been in hospital within the past year have may be at greater risk for MRSA.

Preventing MRSA and other Staph Infections

Staph infections including MRSA are spread by close contact with infected people (skin-to-skin or shared surfaces). You can protect yourself from infections by practicing good hygiene:

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water or alcohol-based hand rub.
- Keep cuts and scrapes

clean and covered with a bandage until healed.

- Avoid contact with other people’s wounds/bandages.
- Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, sheets, needles, razors.
- Use a barrier (towel, sheet) between skin and shared surfaces such as bed mats.
- Sanitize shared surfaces (bed mats, change tables, etc) before and after use.

What to do if you suspect someone has MRSA

Most staph and MRSA infections are treatable with antibiotics. Anyone who thinks they have an infection or who has symptoms should contact their health provider.



For more flu information:

- www.metrokc.gov/health/immunization/fluseason.htm
- www.cdc.gov/flu/

Cold & Flu Season Preparations

Flu season is fast approaching and HCHN is preparing to offer flu shot clinics for homeless service agencies.

Vaccine shortages are not expected in 2005. Beginning Oct 24th all persons will be eligible for a flu shot. Those at high risk for flu include people with chronic conditions, people over 65, children 6-24 months, pregnant women, and people working with clients at high risk.

Cold and Flu Prevention Tips

Basic hygiene and hand-washing practices are another excellent way to prevent colds and flu.

- Wash hands or use an alcohol based rub, especially before eating, after bus rides, and whenever you enter the shelter setting. Stop germs at the door!
- Avoid touching your face.
- Cover coughs and sneezes with the inner elbow.

Homeless Flu Shot Clinics

HCHN Nurse Heather Barr will be calling homeless service agencies to set up flu shot clinics, prioritizing sites with high-risk clients. Clinics will be offered beginning the third week in October. If you do not hear from her but would like to discuss flu shots or receive “cover your cough” posters, call 206-296-4599.



If you are awarded funding under the City of Seattle’s 2006 Shelter & Transitional Housing RFP. . . .

Get Help Meeting Seattle’s New Minimum Shelter Standards

Awarded funding under the City of Seattle’s 2006 Shelter & Transitional Housing RFP? If so, Health Care for the Homeless Network (HCHN) is available to help you assure that your program meet the new health-related standards.

Many of you already have good basic practices in place

to build upon. HCHN staff can help look at your current policies and practices, make recommendations, and help tweak your policies, as needed, to assist you in complying with the new health and safety standards.

For assistance, call Heather Barr at 296-4599 or email heather.barr@metrokc.gov

For assistance with your TB policies and practices, call Marcia Stone at 296-4730 or marcia.stone@metrokc.gov

If you weren’t awarded funds but would like this same kind of technical assistance, don’t despair. We can work with you as well, so please call us.

Tuberculosis: The Outbreak Strain is Still With Us

Public Health—Seattle & King County's TB Control Program reports there have been 16 cases of TB among homeless people in King County so far this year.

The "fingerprint" of some of those cases continues to match that of the outbreak strain that was so dominant in 2002-03.

While 16 cases is down from the 2002-03 outbreak levels

(65 cases in those two years), it is still higher than the pre-outbreak levels of about a dozen cases per year.

Prevent the spread of TB:

- Actively screen clients for TB symptoms (chronic cough, weight loss, night sweats) and refer them to health care for evaluation.
- Conduct a simple risk assessment to help your agency develop appropriate practices for TB prevention and control.
- Post "cover your cough" posters – available free from HCHN in English and Spanish.
- For assistance with risk assessment, policy development, and other concerns relating to TB call:

**Marcia Stone, TB Liaison
Public Health Nurse
206-296-4730**

**"There have been
16 cases of TB
among homeless
people in King
County so far this
year"**

Ask the Nurse



Dear Nurse
Heather:

I notice the new City of Seattle standards for homeless shelters says "A process must be in place to sanitize mats on a regular basis and always between use by different residents." That seems like a lot of trouble for our busy staff. Why is this so important, and how should we sanitize them?

— Busy Shelter Staff

Dear Busy Shelter Staff:

Gotta take you to the mat on this one, and by the time you finish reading this, you will be glad that the mat was nicely sanitized!

Shared objects and surfaces are one of the main ways that

germs are spread from one person to another. Common culprits include keyboards, telephones, hand rails, athletic equipment, benches in gyms and saunas, pretty much anything that could have been touched by a person with a skin infection like Staph aureus or Streptococcus. Some shelters provide a sheet or blanket to cover mats, but bedding may shift and the person's skin may contact the mat's surface. Staph, particularly MRSA (see accompanying article) has been found in settings such as jails, prisons, nursing homes, & child care centers. People who live in crowded settings and/or those who may not have the ability or desire to access hygiene facilities are at greater risk for acquiring MRSA, and people

who have weakened immune systems are more vulnerable, thus shelters can be an ideal setting for the spread of infection.

Armed with this knowledge, what can shelter staff do to prevent the spread of skin infections such as MRSA?

- Have clients with skin infections keep their wounds covered by band-aids, bandages, clothing.
- Have clients with persistent or bothersome infections be seen by a medical provider.
- Encourage hand washing among clients and staff.
- Use gloves when handling bedding, clothing, and towels used by others.
- Provide alcohol based hand sanitizer by keyboards and phones.
- Sanitize mats after each

use. This can be accomplished inexpensively and efficiently by simply misting the mats with a dilute bleach solution (1 Tbsp per gallon of cool water, prepared fresh each morning) and allowing the mats to air dry. This will also kill cold and flu viruses that may be present on the mat as well.

You and your clients will sleep better knowing that measures to prevent the spread of infection have been taken. Thank you for your interest in the Best Practice Guidelines!

If you have a question you would like to ask Nurse Heather email: heather.barr@metrokc.gov
Or mail your question to:
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HEALTHY PEOPLE. HEALTHY COMMUNITIES.

Health Care for the Homeless Network is a community project of Public Health—Seattle & King County.

Health Care for the Homeless Network sends out periodic health news updates to the community with health tips for staff and volunteers who work in shelters, day centers, hygiene programs, feeding programs, housing programs, and other programs that serve homeless and low-income people.

In this issue we're pleased to announce a new special column, "Ask the Nurse."

Do you have questions for us? Topics you'd like to see us address?

Email us at hchn@metrokc.gov

If you would like to be removed from the mailing list for this newsletter please email Margery Muench at margery.muench@metrokc.gov